

Missing People Benefits from Kapow! Text Appeal

From reaching out to vulnerable children to raising funds to keep the search for runaways alive, SMS has proved to be a very versatile communications tool for charity Missing People.

Missing People provides support for missing children, vulnerable adults and families left in limbo. The London based charity offers the families of the missing specialist advice and practical support as well as searching - securing publicity that could end years of heartache.

A major part of Missing People's work is Runaway Helpline, a national, free, confidential service that was set up to provide runaways with support and advice, helping them to escape abusive situations or just letting someone know they are safe, as well as reuniting them with families where appropriate. Traditionally runaways have been able to contact Missing People through the service using a telephone or email, but research showed that many runaways felt safer communicating via text on their mobile phone.

Missing People has been using SMS as a communications tool for sometime and has a longstanding relationship with Kapow, the UK's first SMS gateway provider. However, using text messaging as a method for communicating with Runaway Helpline presented a problem. One of the guarantees for anyone contacting the helpline is that their call or email is totally confidential and that the charity's team do not know who the runaway is or where they are, unless the person chooses to tell them.

"When we first started looking at using SMS we looked at a number of providers, but Kapow offered the best charity rates and were very keen to help us with logistical issues too," explains Alison Cowan, Director of Fundraising and Marketing at Missing People. "We provided them with all our ideas and asked if there was a way to maintain the young person's confidentiality, whilst also being able to recognise if we have had contact by SMS from the same person before.

"Typically, Kapow were very enthusiastic about the idea and developed the technology for us, which keeps the runaway's mobile number completely confidential, whilst still allowing us to respond to messages received as appropriate." After the first text from a mobile phone is received, an automated text is sent back to reassure the sender that someone will contact them. Trained staff and volunteers at Missing People then reply personally.

The free to text service was added to Runaway Helpline last November. The very first message received was just one word - 'Help'. A young boy had run away after being abused by his father. Missing People found Sam a safe place to go in the local area. In the first six months of the new service being launched Missing People has received texts from more than 1500 vulnerable children, many of whom may have been previously too scared to pick up the phone and ask for help in the past.

More recently Kapow has helped Missing People in its "Keep the Search Alive" campaign by providing the mechanism that enables members of the public to donate five pounds via their mobile phones, which could provide six hours of support to young people contacting Runaway Helpline. Using the Kapow! Text Appeal service, Missing People is able to receive one-off donations facilitated via the donors mobile account regardless of which network operator they use.

"The out-of-home advertising specialists Admedia offered us free sites for the campaign and we decided that Text really fitted their media space. Many of the ad sites were in places such as leisure centres and pubs where there's significant dwell time so people can really engage with the content of the adverts," says Alison Cowan. "Kapow again provided us with the mechanism that would enable people to donate easily using their mobile phones simply by texting MISSING to 82010."

Other people's generosity means a lot to families such as the Osborns from Buckingham. Their daughter Samantha went missing from home in 2007 at the age of 15 during which time she called Runaway Helpline. They have now been reunited.

"SMS has proved a versatile and reliable communications medium for us," concludes Alison Cowan. "This latest campaign has been a real success. We have already recruited over five hundred new donors and exceeded our income targets. None of this would have been possible without Kapow's support and expertise in delivering the service."